

# Report

## Mojave National Preserve

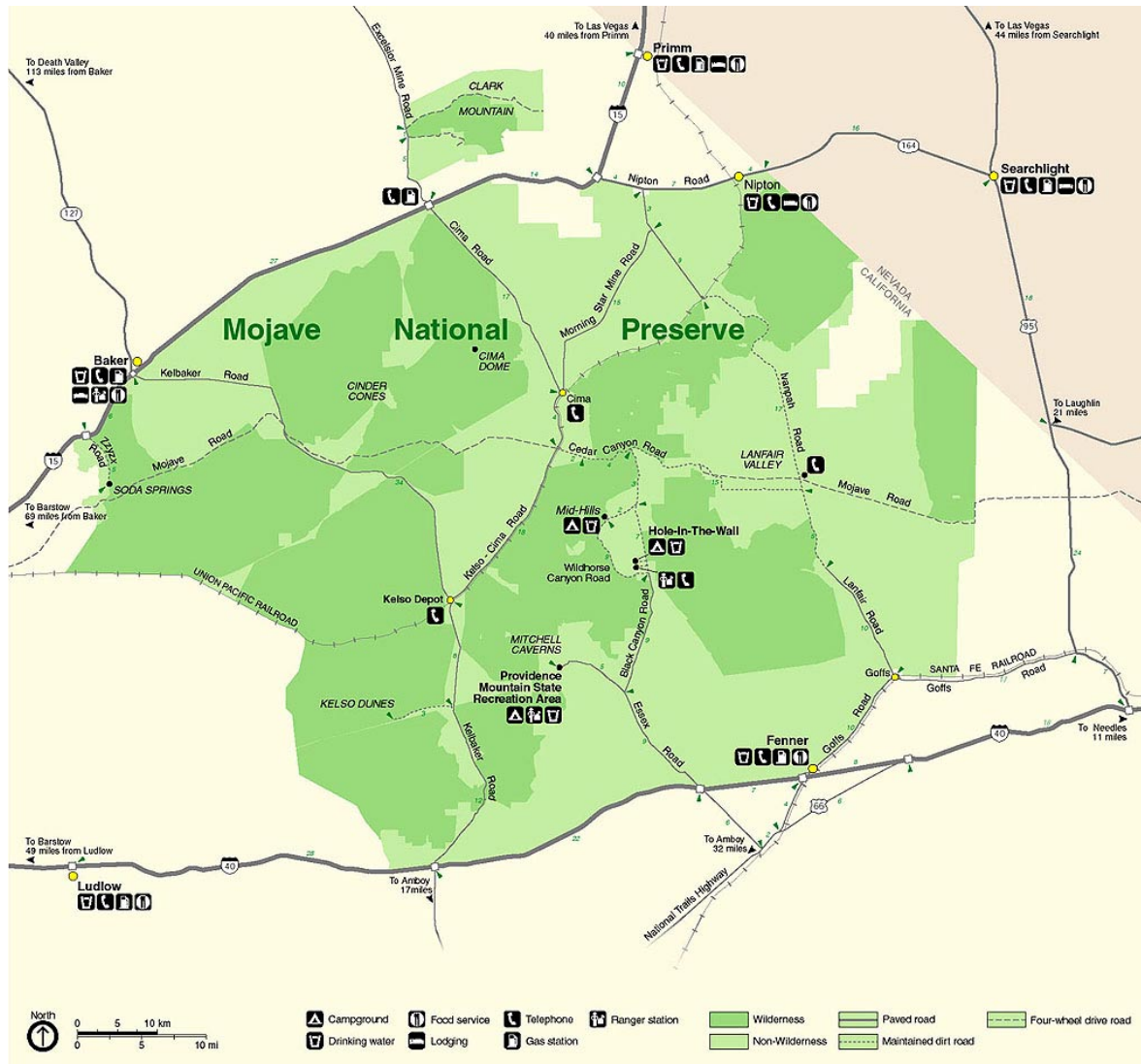
### ■ 1.0 Site Description



The 1.6 million-acre Mojave National Preserve is located in southern California adjacent to the California-Nevada border. Located between Interstate 40 and Interstate 15 (see Figure 1), the Preserve is accessible to the major population centers in the Los Angeles, California, and Las Vegas, Nevada, regions. The Preserve is located halfway between Las Vegas (about 50 miles along Interstate 15) and Joshua Tree National Park. Gateway communities include the towns of Baker, Fenner, and Nipton. Six freeway exits provide visitor access.

Established by the California Desert Protection Act of 1994, the Mojave Preserve protects one of the most diverse desert environments in the world. Its 1.6 million acres represent Great Basin, Sonoran, and Mojave desert ecosystems. About 700,000 acres of the Preserve are legislated wilderness. About half of the Preserve's acreage is designated as critical habitat for the threatened desert tortoise. Natural features of interest include the Kelso sand dune system, dry lake beds, evidence of volcanic activity, and a Joshua Tree forest. The area is home to bighorn sheep, desert tortoise, mule deer, golden eagles and other wildlife. Wildflowers carpet the desert in spring. There are also numerous sites of historic interest including old mail and trade routes as well as ranching, farming, mining, and military sites.

In addition to scenic touring and exploration, camping is one of the most popular activities in Mojave National Preserve. There are two developed campgrounds, Hole-in-the-Wall and Mid Hills. Both of these are centrally located and accessible via paved or maintained dirt roads. While both back-country and roadside camping are allowed, visitors are directed to select previously used sites and encouraged to minimize their impact.

**Figure 1. Location of the Mojave National Preserve**

The visitor experience sought at Mojave stresses independent exploration and proximity to natural environments without overly obtrusive interpretive facilities. For example, with respect to desired conditions along four-wheel-drive routes, the draft General Management Plan, states that “Some visitors experience a strong sense of exploration, challenge, and adventure.” In addition, the NPS prefers that surrounding communities provide most of the support facilities and services for visitors.

## 1.1 Roads and Transportation Corridors

As shown in Figure 1, the Preserve is crossed by about 1,200 miles of paved and unpaved roads. Traffic is light and there are no currently cited problems with congestion or parking capacity. The quality of the roads ranges from paved two-lane roads, to well maintained dirt roads, to extremely rough four-wheel-drive routes. These roads are the

primary means of both accessing and experiencing the Preserve for visitors. The NPS Web site recommends that, “A basic visit...includes a scenic drive of at least one hour.”

Additionally, the Preserve’s draft General Management Plan states with respect to desired future conditions that, “Paved and graded roads are the dominant experience for most visitors. Visitors use these narrow corridors and roadside pullouts for touring, enjoying scenic overlooks, and gaining access to natural and cultural features.” Off-road travel by vehicle is not permitted in order to protect the fragile desert environment.

While there are several options for traversing the Preserve in a north-south direction, the only east-west route is the unpaved Mojave Road, which constitutes one of the Preserve’s primary attractions (see Figure 2). This historic trade route requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Along the way the visitor can see the remnants of historic army posts and a wide variety of desert landscapes. There is even a guidebook to the Mojave Road written by a local historian.

**Figure 2. Historic Photo of Mojave Road**



## **1.2 Visitation Patterns**

About 378,000 people visited Mojave National Preserve in 1997 and about 374,000 in 1998. Most of the visitation occurs in the fall, when more moderate temperatures prevail (summer time temperatures can reach 120°F) and in spring when the wildflowers are also in bloom. Monthly visitation in 1998 ranged from about 13,000 in August to 48,000 in May.

According to a 1997 visitor survey, most of the Preserve’s visitors came in individual family groups. Only three percent visited on a tour organized by a group such as the Sierra Club or a college class. Most of the visitors came from California or Nevada and stayed at the Preserve for less than one day. The four most popular activities engaged in by visitors included sightseeing (61 percent of survey respondents), driving on paved

roads (56 percent), driving on unpaved roads (51 percent), and nature study (49 percent). The most popular sites visited in the Preserve included Kelso Depot (66 percent), Kelso Dunes (57 percent), and Hole-in-the-Wall Campground (35 percent).

The Mojave National Preserve is not a destination park. Most visitors visit the Preserve on their way to an ultimate destination. In the 1997 visitor survey, the other places people visited during the trip to the Preserve included Las Vegas (56 percent of respondents), Joshua Tree National Park (35 percent), the town of Baker, California (34 percent) and Death Valley National Park (27 percent).

## ■ 2.0 Existing ATS

A Union Pacific railroad corridor also traverses the Mojave Preserve en route between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Amtrak does not currently run any passenger trains through this corridor but it does see fairly heavy freight traffic. There are some conflicts between trains and vehicles crossing the tracks on Kelbacker Road and the NPS has requested installation of crossing arms. There are also plans to renovate the abandoned rail depot at Kelso as the primary visitor information center and this would support the reintroduction of passenger trains along the route.

## ■ 3.0 ATS Needs

There are two potential applications of Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) in Mojave National Preserve in the near future. The first option would involve reintroduction of passenger train service along the Union Pacific Rail corridor that runs through the Preserve. The NPS has embarked on a \$4 million project to restore the old Kelso Depot, a 1924 train station built by Union Pacific Railroad. Now in disrepair, the depot remains the centerpiece building inside the park. Once renovated, the depot will be of interest to train buffs as well as serving as the primary visitor center for the Preserve. Planning for restoration of the depot is well along and funds for design services have been included in the current NPS budget.

Both the NPS and surrounding communities support reintroduction of passenger train service through the Preserve. Advocates of the idea have proposed that excursion trains could be run from Los Angeles Union Station to Las Vegas with stops at Barstow, Kelso Depot, and Nipton. The NPS has, in the past, placed interpretive staff on Amtrak trains with some success and this would be an idea to consider as well.

The second option for ATS would involve privately run tours of the Preserve using four-wheel-drive vehicles. Issues identified in the scoping process for the Preserve's draft General Management Plan include the need to "Evaluate potential concession operations, including jeep tours that could provide access to many people and a concession/permit system permitting access on closed trails." An entrepreneur based in the town of Nipton

has expressed some interest in providing this type of service and there are considered to be successful examples of privately operated desert tours running out of Palm Springs, California. Any such private tour business would need to obtain operating permits from the NPS, primarily so that the agency could educate tour groups about minimizing impacts on the desert environment.

As noted above, there are currently no pressing transportation, congestion, or parking issues at Mojave National Preserve. Thus, the short-term need for ATS is minimal. However, ATS could play a role in expanding access to the Preserve and supporting local economic development at some point in the future, as described below.

## ■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

Implementation of ATS in Mojave National Preserve would have two primary objectives. First, ATS would allow people who do not have the use of a four-wheel-drive vehicle or do not wish to drive on dirt roads to experience and appreciate the Preserve. For example, visitors could utilize a commercial tour to experience the Mojave Road, which is one of the principal attractions of the Preserve. The other primary reason for implementing ATS would be the economic development of adjacent communities. Local entrepreneurs could run tour businesses. Tours starting in or passing through the towns would encourage longer visits and higher visitor spending. In addition, passenger train service would allow larger numbers of visitors to experience the Preserve in the future with only minimal impacts to the environment.

## ■ 5.0 Bibliography

Mojave National Preserve, California, *Draft Environmental Impact Statement and General Management Plan*.

University of Idaho, *Mojave National Preserve Visitor Study*; Report 94, Visitor Services Project, Cooperative Park Studies Unit, Spring 1997.

*Tenuous Truce Survives as Efforts Proceed to Protect, Manage a Portion of the Wild West*, San Jose Mercury News, November 29, 1999.

## ■ 6.0 Person Interviewed

David B. Moore, Facilities Manager